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### Factors Supporting the Leadership of Women of Color in Higher Education, Local Politics, and the Nonprofit Sector

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**Capstone Proposal: Factors Supporting the Leadership of Women of Color in Higher  
Education, Local Politics, and the Nonprofit Sector**

Kayla J. Bynum and Paula Gomez Stordy

# FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women of color (WOC) are underrepresented in leadership roles within the fields of higher education and the nonprofit sector. The purpose of this study is to learn about the experiences of WOC who have achieved leadership roles in their professional fields. The collective experiences of women of color leaders will inform best practices for WOC who are pursuing professional leadership roles or professional mobility. These best practices will be beneficial for WOC, as well as employers who have the power to create a culture which supports the leadership of diverse WOC. It is essential for their leadership to inform best practices within these institutions since nonprofits serve communities of color and higher education institutions can support the advancement of communities of color through education leading to sustainable employment.

Through a literature review, researchers learned WOC are often not supported professionally. The literature has also informed researchers of terminology describing stereotypes and discrimination WOC face in the workplace, common experiences of women and WOC, and strategies for WOC to achieve leadership roles. The researchers present an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach to study the experiences of women of color leaders (WOCL) in the fields of higher education and the nonprofit. This study included a seventeen-question online survey to elicit responses about: demographics, barriers to professional advancement, and factors supporting their professional advancement. The researchers have identified WOC who hold positions of leadership within nonprofits organizations, local politics, and higher education in Massachusetts and Connecticut. As investigators of this research and as WOC who have held leadership positions within higher

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

education institutions and nonprofits, we are insiders to this research. As researchers of this study, we are working to understand the different experiences of WOCL.

Through the findings, we were able to identify five key factors that attributed to the advancement and success of WOC. These five key factors are: access to formal education and training, mentorship and strong relationships, supportive workplace environments, individual attributes and self-directed learning, and spirituality. While conducting our research, we found certain limitations that prevented us from reaching our desired outcome. Our first limitation was that we did not receive our desired number of WOCL within local politics. Another limitation to our study was our timeline. Finally, we found the recruitment of WOC in higher education to be challenging.

For individuals or institutions who are interested in further research of this topic, we suggest future qualitative research to explore the layers of oppression faced by WOC with multiple identities including: religion, sexual orientation, gender expression, gender-identity, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, disabilities, and US citizenship. Further research should also look to understand how the workplace and supervisors can support the professional mobility of WOC and their quest to professional advancement. The research has highlighted the importance of mentorship and social capital play in the leadership development and sustainment of WOC.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**INTRODUCTION..... Page 6**

- Purpose of Study..... Page 6
- Rationale..... Page 7
- Major Research Questions..... Page 8
- Hypotheses..... Page 8
- Significance..... Page 9
- Audience..... Page 9
- Definition of Terms..... Page 9

**LITERATURE REVIEW..... Page 10**

- The Representation of WOC in Leadership Roles Within Nonprofit Organizations,  
Higher Education and Politics..... Page 10
- The Stereotypes of Gender Roles..... Page 14
- How Perceptions Impact WOC..... Page 15
- History..... Page 15
- Mentoring and Collaboration Amongst WOC..... Page 16
- The Struggle of Obtaining Leadership Roles & Social Mobility..... Page 17
- How to Overcome Adversity..... Page 18
- Educational Degrees Matter..... Page 18
- WOC Navigating Their Identity..... Page 19
- Influence is a Major Factor..... Page 20

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

- Terminology of Stereotypes..... Page 21
- Recommendations..... Page 22

## **METHODOLOGY**..... **Page 23**

- Researcher’s Positionality..... Page 24
- Paradigm..... Page 25
- Overview of Research Design..... Page 26
- Quality Criteria..... Page 26
- Description of Sample..... Page 27
- Methods for Selecting Participants..... Page 28
- Methods for Gathering Data..... Page 29
- Method of Implementation..... Page 30
- Coding Process..... Page 30

## **RESULTS**..... **Page 30**

## **DISCUSSION**..... **Page 39**

- Connecting Our Findings to the Literature..... Page 40
- Unexpected Findings..... Page 44
- Limitations..... Page 46
- Recommendations for Future Research..... Page 48
- Recommendations for Policy and Practice..... Page 49

## **CONCLUSION**..... **Page 52**

## **REFERENCES**..... **Page 54**

# FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

## **Introduction**

There is a lack of representation of women of color (WOC) in leadership roles within the fields of higher education, the nonprofit sector, and local politics (Lou, 2015). Often, WOC lack opportunity, mentorship, and social capital to access professional mobility. In addition to support deficiency, WOC also face issues of racism, sexism, and discrimination on their quest for leadership attainment. According to Sanchez-Hucles & Davis (2010), “A current problem is how to expand the number of women and WOC in leadership positions. Increasing the number of women leaders is important for thicker barriers posed by the racism combined with sexism that WOC encounter” (p. 171). This study will identify the strengths and supportive factors WOC in leadership roles possess, and the necessary inputs for WOC in achieving and maintaining a leadership role.

## **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to learn about the experiences of WOC who have achieved leadership roles in their professional fields. The collective experiences of women of color leaders (WOCL) will inform best practices for WOC who are pursuing professional leadership roles or professional mobility. These best practices will be beneficial for WOC, as well as employers who have the power to create a culture which supports the leadership of diverse WOC. WOC in leadership roles have true influence on policy, practice, and laws. These WOCL impact the welfare and the advancement of communities of color. This study will focus on the fields of higher education, the nonprofit sector, and local politics. The nonprofit sector has been included in our study because many nonprofit organizations offer services that support and largely affect communities of color. Community involvement proposed by these nonprofit agencies must be

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

culturally relevant and diverse in order to best serve underserved communities who are often represented by people of color.

Similarly to the nonprofit sector, local politics impact local resources such as affordable housing, zoning regulations, healthcare, and public education that are often obtained by underserved communities. We are interested in examining local politics because women are currently underrepresented in local politics and WOC are less represented than white women (O'Connor & Yanus, 2004). If WOC hold leadership positions within local government, their individual experiences within their positions will enhance their decision-making efforts (Mansbridge, 1999). According to Mansbridge (1999), members of underserved communities wish to be represented by individuals whose backgrounds are parallel to the backgrounds and experiences lived by the individuals of these underprivileged groups. Lastly, we have chosen to examine the field of higher education because it is often considered an essential element for economic and professional mobility for people who typically do not have access to resources or wealth. When higher education institutions are interested in maintaining the retention rates of students of color, it is important for these institutions to have representations of people of color who hold academic and administrative positions.

### **Rationale**

WOC face multiple forms of oppression including racism and sexism. As a result of these oppressive systems, WOC face additional barriers than white women face when striving for economic stability and professional development (Combs, 2003). Examining African American women specifically, Combs (2003) explains how the intersectionality of race and gender experienced by African American women in the workplace creates a system of inequalities based on gender and race biases. These biases are then filtered through the daily experiences of African



## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

American women as they work to gain social and professional mobility within their respective fields (Combs, 2003).

For the purpose of our study, we have recognized there are only a few WOC who currently hold leadership roles and in interviewing them, the research will investigate how they have dealt with and continue to deal with barriers and as well as access to social and professional capital. Their experiences will inform and support other WOC in their quest to leadership roles. Laws and policies impact the physical, spiritual, and mental health of individuals as well as their housing, education, employment, wealth, transportation, criminalization, reproductive rights, childcare, and elder services. With an increased representation of WOCL, we anticipate seeing more accessible and equitable laws, services, resources, and education for communities of color, in particular women and girls of color.

### **Major Research Questions**

Our major research questions for this study look to understand, (a) Do WOC face barriers in the workplace on their quest to a leadership role? If so, what are they? (b) Who or what has supported WOC in leadership positions? (c) How do WOC in leadership roles describe their strengths? How do others describe their strengths?

### **Hypotheses**

We believe that the research will support our preconceived notions that WOC are true assets in the fields of higher education, the nonprofit sector and local politics, but often do not have the social capital necessary for professional mobility. Therefore, the recruitment and mentorship of WOC is essential in increasing their social capital, resulting in achieving leadership roles and building the capacity of organizations and institutions that hire them.

### **Significance**

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

This research is meaningful because it will help to support and increase the access of professional mobility for WOC who are looking to enhance their professional roles and to achieve true social justice.

### **Audience**

This study will be of interest to WOC, students of color, young WOC, and WOC employees who are interested in advancing to leadership roles. We will also share these findings with employers, human resource representatives, and nonprofit leadership, who are interested in diversifying the workplace to create an inclusive environment. We will share the results with associations, community groups, and networks who support the leadership of WOC. Finally, we will share the research with higher education institutions, specifically student associations and committees comprised of faculty and staff who are working to expand the institution's diversity and inclusivity in order to attract and retain students of color and employees of color. Our focus will be to share our findings with individuals and organizations who are committed in creating diverse and multicultural learning environments.

### **Definition of Terms**

**WOC:** Any woman who is not white or of European parentage. (i.e. women from or descendant of Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and indigenous people of America). The term WOC came from the Women's Conference in 1970 when a group of Black women of Washington D.C. wrote the "Women's Black Agenda" in response to what the Minority Women's Plank Conference organizers wrote about minority women. These Black women wanted the delegates to vote to replace the Minority Women's Plank, which they thought was insufficient with the Black Women's Agenda. Women from other ethnic groups wanted to be included and instead of the Black Women's Agenda it became the WOC Agenda. Hence, the

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

term is one of inclusion and solidarity among women who experience racism. It is a political term, not a biological term (L. Ross, personal communication, February 15, 2011).

**Leadership:** is defined as a person who guides or directs a group. For the purpose of our research, we define leadership as an individual whose voice impacts outcomes such as vision, policies, decisions, mission, or protocols.

**Professional Mobility:** has been defined as a key lever to career development and as means for employees to improve and enhance capabilities. In our research, we define this term as the opportunity to advance professionally and obtain access to institutional power and wealth.

**Social Capital:** has been defined as the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society, enabling that society to function effectively. In our research, we define this term as a community of networks that provides support through resources, information, connections, and relationships.

**WOCL- WOC Leaders.** We define leaders as having real influence over policies, laws, protocols, etc.

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

In reviewing scholarly articles pertaining to the leadership of WOC, we learned terminology describing stereotypes and discrimination WOC face in the workplace, common experiences of women and WOC, and strategies for WOC to achieve leadership roles. In this literature review, we have categorized the information gathered in subsections.

#### **The Representation of WOC in Leadership Roles within Nonprofit Organizations, Higher Education, and Politics**

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

**Nonprofits.** Nonprofit organizations have been working endlessly to highlight and showcase how diverse and unique their organizations are. Understanding the importance of appearing to be an inclusive organization to community members and stakeholders, many nonprofit organizations have invested many of their resources into redesigning the structure of their organizations to create a diverse workplace. By doing so, these institutions are working to prove to clients and stakeholders that they are aiming to provide quality support to the communities in which they serve. Funders often ask the gender, racial, and ethnic makeup of nonprofit's board of directors, staff, and volunteers. Nonprofit organizations often offer services to communities in need; however, many organizations in the nonprofit sector are managed by white non-Hispanic individuals who oversee a diverse staff (Adesaogun, Flottemesch, & Ibrahim-DeVries, 2015). Researchers have identified the lack of diversity in decision-making roles within the nonprofit sector as detrimental to the success of such organizations. Nonprofit agencies that lack representation from people of color in leadership roles may experience difficulty in responding to the needs of their targeted populations, seeing as though many of the populations are comprised of racially diverse individuals (Adesaogun et al., 2015). With such a lack of participation from WOC in leadership roles within this sector, WOC have experienced difficulties as they navigate through the historical stereotypes that have been constructed against people of color such as:

- Black women were stereotyped as being incompetent, intellectually inferior, or hostile. (Hall, Everett, & Hamilton-Mason 2012)
- Black women were passed for promotions given to less qualified white colleagues (Hall et al., 2012)

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

- African American women are more likely to experience unfair treatment in training and advancement, disengagement, discrimination, prejudice, and lack of psychosocial and instrumental support (Bova, 2000).
- Women of color face additional forms of discrimination in the workplace that White women may escape. Women of color receive lower pay than White men and women as well as men of color, and they must learn to maintain a positive self-image when confronted with “micro aggressions” that could halt promotions, mentoring, and success (Holvino & Blake-Beard, 2004).

**Higher education.** Although women have increasingly attained roles in education and higher education, men have possessed roles in higher education with more power, influence, and compensation as highlighted by English (2006), men held 21% of all teaching positions in the year 2000, however, they made up 87% of superintendent positions. Researchers have connected the difficulty WOC experience on their quest for leadership roles within higher education to the out-of-date model that many organizations follow. Lou (2015) writes, “Womyn of Color leaders working in student affairs face challenges navigating institutional roles while working within dominant forms of leadership, which favor Western values of success” (p. 87). WOC possess experience and knowledge that can help bring institutions of higher education to levels of success. Teague (2016) wrote, citing Ernst and Young (2009) that,

Leaders with a diverse set of experiences, viewpoints, and backgrounds are crucial to encouraging different perspectives, broadening an institution's world views, and fostering innovation particularly important at colleges and universities responsible for educating and training future leaders, workers, and citizens. Studies show that gender diversity in organizations' top offices and in the

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

boardroom is not just a matter of social justice and advancement but a smart business move as well.

Lou (2015) explained “Within a postsecondary educational context, student affairs administrators should not only honor the academics skills but also the experiential knowledge of politically savvy womyn of Color leaders” (p. 91). Recognizing that there is a gap that exists between WOC in leadership roles is a common theme amongst the literature we have read thus far. In its own way, each article seems to understand the lack of WOC in leadership roles within higher education; however, they did not provide suggestions as to how WOC can obtain and sustain their social capital. According to Alexander (2010),

The American Council on Education (ACE) along with the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources note that women comprise only 38 percent of chief academic officers in higher education. Moreover, the statistics indicate that African American women hold only 5 percent of these positions, Hispanic women 2.4 percent, Asian American women 1.9 percent and American Indian women a mere 0.2 percent (p. 193).

**Local politics.** There was a significant lack of information related specifically to WOC in leadership roles within politics. Although the research that has already been conducted does not include the voices of WOC, it still raises issues of sexism within politics and the lack of women within these roles. According to O’Connor and Yanus (2004), “Only since the 1960s have women political leaders been able to create social change from within American governmental institutions” (p. 2). These roles are typically positions held by middle-aged white men. Much of the research conducted by O’Connor and Yanus (2004) suggests that many constituents of various states would not trust their local politics to women because of their stereotypical gender

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

roles. Although many community members do not trust politics in the hands of women, there are men that do. O'Connor and Yanus (2004) wrote, "Significant research by political scientist indicates that the presence of women political leaders in legislatures make a significant difference not only in what gets discussed, but also in what kinds of legislation are advanced" (p. 9). It has been found that women in leadership roles within politics tend to develop leadership styles that are based on collaboration, guidance, and support. When women are in politics, strategies become more integrative and structured (O'Connor & Yanus, 2004).

It is essential that WOC hold positions in politics since these positions create and influence acts, bills, and laws that impact the well-being and liberty of our communities. MacGregor Burns defines political leadership as "the power a leader exercises through his or her relationships. The people with whom the political leader interacts, and how he or she interacts with those people, become essential in defining the strengths and weaknesses of any political leader", as cited in O'Connor & Yanus, (2004). WOC have an intimate understanding of experiences people of color face and although there is diversity among people of color, WOC understand there are cultural differences among people of color. Therefore, an understanding of those differences is necessary when advocating for new bills. One size does not fit all. If we approach politics in this manner, we may face unintended consequences that harm people of color. Unfortunately, there is a lack of WOC within political leadership roles worldwide (O'Connor & Yanus, 2004).

### **The Stereotypes of Gender Roles**

Common barriers faced by women and WOC are beyond the control of women and WOC such as, stereotypes. These stereotypes of women are barriers to the professional advancement of women and WOC. A stereotype faced by women is that they are emotional and they cannot

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

make decisions that require strategy and analysis. Assertiveness and competitiveness are qualities often associated with successful leadership; however, these traits are considered to be masculine traits and not feminine traits. These perceived traits, of course, are stereotypes, as addressed by O'Connor & Yanus (2004),

Nearly half of those polled during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s said a woman would be preferred to a man as the head of the local Red Cross chapter or Parent Teacher Association. The public supported women in these positions because they were extensions of women's primary roles as mother and homemaker (p. 5).

Today, women are expected to have a balance of both masculine and feminine traits of leadership, that is, assertive and directive as well as warm and a team player.

### **How Perceptions Impact WOC**

Stereotypes can affect women and WOC in leadership roles because of their detrimental influence on perceptions and their elicitation of stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Stereotypical threats occur when one cares about a domain (e.g., one wishes to be an effective leader), when one knows that a stereotype about the group of which one is a member can provide an explanation for poor performance in this domain (e.g., women are expected by others to be less effective as leaders), and when a stereotype is made salient in a situation requiring performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 174).

### **History**

Through history, women have demonstrated both these masculine and feminine traits. Women in social justice movements throughout history have been involved in movements that benefit the wellbeing of their families and communities and in advocating for their best interest, they have been assertive, determined, and at times aggressive in order to achieve social



## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

justice. O'Connor and Yanus (2004) wrote, "just as a generation of women became politically active during the antislavery movement, the U.S. civil rights movement of the 1960s created a new generation of women political leaders" (O'Connor & Yanus, 2004, p. 5). Unlike the women of the suffrage movement, who persuaded men to grant them the vote because women would be of service to the general public, especially men, women from the second wave of feminism advocated for the liberty of women and for full equal rights to men. These equal rights included women having autonomy in decision making over their rights, benefits, and liberties. O'Connor & Yanus (2004) highlight, "At the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, 189 governments agreed to take measures to ensure women's full access to power structures and decision making to increase women's capacity for decisions making and leadership" (2004, p. 8).

### **Mentoring and Collaboration Amongst WOC**

Mentoring is very important element when it comes to WOC accessing social mobility within their professional careers. Lou (2015) writes "Mentoring relationships formed between womyn of Color and other leaders with non-dominant identities and dominant identities can be positive in increasing retention and promotion" (p. 92). There have been many historical collaborations that have helped to identify the strengths of mentoring. In one study, O'Connor & Yanus (2004) reminded us that "one of the first African-American women to serve in Congress, Shirley Chisholm, joined forces with Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan, and Representative Bella Abzug to form the nonpartisan National Women's Political Caucus (NWPC) in 1971" (p. 6). Collaboration tends to be a result of a successful relationship. Many WOC who have identified themselves as holding positions of power and influence, have mentioned the importance of mentoring for WOC for professional advancement. O'Connor and Yanus (2004) explained,

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

If our society wants to continue increasing the number of women in positions of political leadership, we must socialize young women to become active participants in society and government. Moreover, existing women leaders must work to change the pervasive perception that political leaders are exclusively old, white men (p. 10).

Not only is mentoring important for the social mobility and advancement of WOC, but it also encourages WOC, builds trust between them, and reassures that they will receive support from someone who has experience similar trials and tribulations. Mentoring can be the key element in achieving corporate success for WOC as it provides encouragement, acceptance, and friendship (Eagly & Carli, 2007, p. 171).

### **The Struggle of Obtaining Leadership Roles and Social Mobility**

The literature has informed us that women of color continue to experience challenges once they attain leadership positions and are more visible targeting them for additional scrutiny and criticism. According to Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010), barriers do not disappear for women after they reach the top. In fact, women of color who are promoted often are at more risk for scrutiny and failure. WOC are likely to be promoted to head of a company or a board of an already failing company and are blamed for the company's decline which was already happening before the promotion. The phenomenon is described as, glass cliff. (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

African American women are too different from White women to benefit from their shared gendered status and too different from Black men to benefit from their shared race. Hence, WOC who strive for leadership positions are different even from others who are also different—White women and African American men (Combs, 2003).

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

### **How to Overcome Adversity**

Women can achieve leadership positions but only by carefully traversing complex paths as they confront issues associated with child care needs, racism, sexism, and discrimination on the basis of identity (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Women must also develop the ability to refuse “glass cliff” appointments to leadership positions that set them up for likely failure (Hewlett et al., 2008). Research informs us that role expectations predict gender differences in leadership style but not in leadership effectiveness (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Women emerge as social and democratic leaders, and men as task leaders (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Karau, 1991). However, recent work highlights the value of the stereotypically feminine traits of cooperation, mentoring, and collaboration (Eagly & Carli, 2007). As more diverse and globally connected organizations are increasingly being created, more creative and diverse types of leadership will be required. Leadership style diversity will need to match global diversity. Stereotyping that negatively impacts WOC must also be examined and dismantled (Brown, 2007).

### **Educational Degrees Matter**

Formal educational degrees have supported the professional and social mobility of people in pursuit of advancement. However, education was not always accessible to women or people of color. It was illegal for Black people to be educated prior to the abolishment of slavery in 1860. Universities did not welcome women as students in the 1800s with the exception of women who came from families with resources to pay for their education. Once these women were educated, this education did not guarantee them a change in their social or economic status. African American women had less opportunities for higher education in comparison to White women. Women who did go to college often went on to take service positions such as teachers and nurses. Slowly, women began to venture into different studies, “the realization is that, before

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

a surge occurs in the number of African American female presidents in higher education, the number of African American women attaining a doctorate needs to increase” (Alexander, 2010, p. 194).

Education is perceived as a gateway to professional and social advancement impacting overall wellbeing. As women access formal education they are not only learning and becoming aware of better opportunities to them but they are also creating new networks with colleagues, academia, and staff that will support their development and advancement. Alexander (2010) explains, “Therefore education becomes a practice of freedom which can propel the Black women into leadership” (p. 198).

### **WOC Navigating Their Identity**

WOCL often find themselves adapting to two different worlds within their work environment. W.E.B. Du Bois first introduced this concept as the *double consciousness*. According to Du Bois, double consciousness is a psychological challenge of reconciling an African Heritage with a European upbringing (Du Bois, 1903). This concept is relative to the split lives that WOC live while working in institutions that are predominantly led by white people. Lou (2015) identifies another way to better understand the double-lives of WOC. The idea of “border crossing” was developed by Gloria E. Anzaldúa. Anzaldúa (1987) explained that WOC develop skills to help them navigate through the borders of nondominant and dominant worlds (Lou, 2015). Such an ability can then begin to weigh heavy on how WOC identify and value themselves. O’Brien (2006) suggested that “race, gender, and class oppression have critiqued the false dichotomies of public/private, reason/emotion, and mind/spirit (among others) as creations of those in power and used to devalue feminine, non-European, working-class ways

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

of being” (O’Brien, 2006, p. 68). Such behaviors have caused working class WOC to experience traumatizing division amongst themselves and others.

### **Influence is a Major Element**

WOC have a deep understanding of the best interests of the community especially communities of color. This understanding, unfortunately, rarely impacts policy because there is an underrepresentation of WOC in leadership roles, unless, leaders are deliberately seeking the input of people of color when they are creating policies and laws. The insight of WOC will impact policy and laws when WOC adequately are represented in leadership positions. This representation will not only impact communities of color, but our whole community as well as our future well-being as Alexander (2010) indicates, “Through teaching, one can empower individuals, communities, and nations and have not only the responsibility but also the obligation to educate, the leaders of tomorrow, to inform them of themselves through knowledge about themselves” (p. 201).

Despite the limited amount of research related to WOC in leadership roles within higher education, politics, and the nonprofit sector, the research that was obtained was beneficial in outlining the broader areas and factors that contribute to the lack of WOCL. Researchers agree that more in depth research must be committed in order to best understand the importance of WOC withholding leadership roles. Teague (2016) agrees WOC are vital and should be supported more within all three areas of higher education, politics, and the nonprofit sector.

### **Terminology of Stereotypes**

**Glass Ceiling:** Is a term that references the barriers faced by women, WOC, and disenfranchised groups when pursuing leadership roles. The leadership positions are visible but for various reasons cannot be attained (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Betters-Reed & Moore, 1995).

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

**Concrete Ceiling:** Similar to the term glass ceiling, concrete ceiling refers to barriers to attaining leadership roles; however, concrete ceiling refers to more of an obvious impossibility of professional mobility due to sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Betters-Reed & Moore, 1995).

**Sticky Floor:** The term sticky floor also references to the inability to ascend professionally within an organization or company (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Betters-Reed & Moore, 1995).

**Bamboo Ceiling:** Asian Americans have a higher degree of academic and economic success compared with the general population. Their success is often emphasized to suggest that they have not experienced discrimination. But Asian Americans are frequently stereotyped as intelligent and diligent, which are positive leadership traits, as well as passive and reserved, which are not considered “managerial” (Fernandez, 1991). Asian Americans are more likely to be university graduates, yet they typically “over qualify” for management positions, which suggests the existence of a “bamboo ceiling” (Hyun, 2005, p. 174).

**Labyrinth:** For many WOC, there is not one way of achieving leadership roles within an organization. They must navigate complicated paths instead of a straight line in their trajectory to leadership. Women are expected to be communal, yet leadership qualities are often perceived as aggressive. Women, especially WOC, must navigate this labyrinth (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

**Glass Cliff:** Glass cliff refers to promoting or appointing women or WOC to a situation of high risk of failure such as a declining organization or board. If the organization fails, they are blamed for the failure that was already set in motion prior to the appointment or hiring (Hewlett et al., 2008).

**Cross-cultural Code Switching:** Changing communication styles, personal, and cultural values when moving between dominant to non-dominant groups. (Lou 2012)

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

### **Recommendations**

Research conducted by Cox (2008) recommends higher institutions adopt the following policies and programs to support and advance the leadership of women of color within higher education. Although these recommendations are intended for higher education institutions, they are relevant for non-profit institutions.

1. Mentoring - Require all departments to develop and be held accountable for formal mentoring structures for all junior faculty members.
2. Recruitment Preparing the Immediate Pipeline - Develop postdoctoral opportunities to support the advancement of excellent for women of color scholars.
3. Cluster Hires - Recruit several faculty members at one time whose work lies outside of the department's traditional core curriculum.
4. Joint Appointments - Upon hire, the chairs of each department where the faculty member holds an appointment must meet with the new hire to establish reasonable departmental service obligations that will not impede the junior faculty member's research and publishing goals. In addition, there must be clear tenure guidelines that establish coherence across departments.
5. Tenure Transparency - Each department must generate a comprehensive manual for tenure track junior faculty to supplement training on the topic of tenure attainment and departmental and university expectations as part of ongoing, structured junior faculty group mentoring. Chairs must also be trained in how to effectively communicate the tenure process to faculty and broadly distribute information regarding critical issues that affect tenure.
6. Formal Acknowledgement and Rewards for Faculty Mentoring of Students

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

7. Hostile Classrooms - Chair Training and Official Statement Regarding Inclusion and Respect
8. Supporting Family and Work Life Balance - The University should publicize existing policies and implement others that are intended to improve the quality of life for faculty and their families on campus.
9. Social Networking - Facilitating Social Support for Single Women of Color Faculty
10. Counteroffer - Acknowledging the Value of Women of Color Faculty

Gender and racial stereotypes have limited the opportunity for women of color to achieve leadership positions as well as increased the scrutiny and criticism of their leadership. WOC are managing multiple factors in their leadership from feminine collaborative traits of leadership as well as perceived masculine assertive traits of leadership while navigating the racial spheres of cultural origins and white dominated workplaces. Managing all these factors creates a labyrinth in achieving leadership roles. There is not one-way women of color achieve success and mobility. Yet, their education and mentoring have proven to be factors that support their leadership.

### **Methodology**

To elicit responses about the supportive factors that contribute to the leadership of WOC, this study included a seventeen-question online survey, as well as five face-to-face interviews with women leaders who identify themselves as WOC in the nonprofit sector, local politics, and higher education. The researchers identified WOC who hold positions of leadership within nonprofits organizations, local politics, and higher education in Massachusetts and



## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

Connecticut. Recruitment of these women was through email asking them to participate in a seventeen-question online survey to learn about the supportive factors of WOC leadership.

We have personal connections with WOC who hold positions of leadership within the higher education and nonprofit fields but do not have direct personal connections with WOC in local politics. We have researched WOC who have run for local positions and who have held local political positions. We have reached out Boston City Councilor, Ayanna Pressley and Boston City Councilor Michelle Wu and their aids about this research and their participation. They both are interested in participating in the research. We asked them to engage their network of WOC to participate in the research to collect comprehensive data from WOC in local politics. We expected WOC who held local political positions will prefer to participate in the online survey because of demanding schedules.

### **Researchers' Positionality**

As investigators of this research and as WOC who have held leadership positions within higher education institutions and nonprofits, we are insiders to this research. Paula Gomez Stordy has held positions of leadership as a Shelter Director and Program Director of a domestic violence program. She has also been a member of decision making committees and currently serves as a commissioner of the Essex County Status of Women Commission and is a founding member and co-chair of the Massachusetts WOC Network. Kayla Bynum has also held positions of leadership as an Assistant Director for The African American Cultural Center at the University of Connecticut and Program Coordinator for the Intercultural Center at Eastern Connecticut State University.

Our insider position benefits our research by giving us access to networks of WOC. Furthermore, we can request consultations, participation in our research, or assistance in

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

recruiting WOC to participate in the research. We feel our awareness of diversity of WOC helps us not to be biased. As WOC, we have similar experiences based on sexism and racism yet our experiences are also very different. WOC have different experiences based on race, ethnicity, immigration status, economic status, gender expression, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, marital status and many other identities.

### **Paradigm**

This specific study of WOCL appears to be fixed within an interpretive research paradigm. As reported by Taylor and Medina (2013), the interpretive research paradigm looks to “understand the culturally different other by learning to stand in their shoes, look through their eyes, and feel their pleasure or pain” (Taylor & Medina, 2013, p 3-4). As researchers of this study, we are working to understand the different experiences of WOCL. As WOC researchers, we understand we may have similar and different experiences to the WOCL we are studying because there is diversity among WOC. This diversity impacts the experiences of WOC differently based on their membership to a target group or a dominant group. For example, queer WOC often experience multiple forms of oppression such as homophobia, heterosexism, racism, and sexism.

This research paradigm also requires investigators to recognize their own roles within the study to have a true understanding of the information that has been shared (Taylor & Medina, 2013). The experiences of a woman of color who identifies as straight may experience both racism and sexism but not be impacted by homophobia. A woman of color who has economic resources may have more social and economic capital than WOC from a working-class background, yet they both may experience racism. That racism may present differently based on privileges held by WOC and the oppressions faced by WOC.

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

### **Overview of Research Design**

Adesaogun et al. (2015) believe that a qualitative method is the best way to measure a study of this nature, and although we do agree with this argument, we also believe that the experiences of WOC in leadership would best be examined through an explanatory sequential mixed methods design. In their research Adesaogun et al. (2015) conducted participant observations, surveys, and semi-structured interviews for 30 Black women in the nonprofit field of a target geographical location (Adesaogun et al. 2015). Within this design, we aim to best understand WOC by collecting quantitative data that will encourage us to follow up with our sample group for a more in-depth understanding of their experiences. We believe a mixed methods approach will give us a deeper understanding of the experiences of WOCL because the qualitative questions will allow WOC to describe their experiences in detail. The findings will allow us to see differences and similarities in the experiences of WOC in leadership roles. This mixed methods approach will be beneficial to us as the researchers because it will give us a more intimate understanding of the experiences of WOC. With this method, our intent is to have the qualitative data give us a deeper understanding of the quantitative data (Creswell, 2014, p. 224).

### **Quality Criteria**

Because the methodology is fixed within a mixed-methods approach, we understand the importance of trustworthiness within a qualitative investigation. In order for us to demonstrate that our interpretations of the data gathered is credible, we have decided to conduct face-to-face interviews in addition to an online-survey. These face-to-face interviews are the best tools to use to guarantee that our findings are both valid and plausible. During the face to face interviews, we will ask questions of clarification or repeat the answer back to the participant to ensure we have understood the answer correctly. With the permission from the participants, we also will record

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

each interview to guarantee that the voices and experiences of each participant have been correctly reflected in our findings. These voice recordings will also help to ensure the transferability of data. Each interview will be transcribed by hand to secure the genuineness and legitimacy of the collected information. Lastly, the credibility of this research is rooted within the authenticity of our interactions with each participant.

### **Description of Sample**

For our research, the sample is WOC who hold, or have previously held leadership positions within the fields of non-profit, local politics, and higher education within Massachusetts and Connecticut. These leadership positions are not limited to executive directors: they can include but are not limited to any position that has influence over institutional decision making, policy, protocols, program design, budgets, laws, and public policy. We hope to explore how much influence or power WOC feel they hold within their institution. Some may hold positions with director titles but may feel they have no influence. Others may hold lesser titles and feel they have influence or voice over workplace outcomes.

We decided to include non-profits because these services support our community. These services must be culturally relevant in order to best serve underserved communities who are often represented by people of color. Similarly, local politics impact our community's access to local resources such as housing, zoning, environment, health and education. Women are underrepresented in politics and WOC are less represented than white women. If WOC hold positions in local government, their personal experiences can enhance their decision making and advocacy that will impact communities of color. Lastly, higher education is often considered a vehicle for economic and professional mobility for people who do not have access to resources or wealth.

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

WOC are underrepresented in higher education. When higher education institutions are interested in recruiting students of color, it is important for these institutions to have representations of people of color who hold academic and administrative positions who can serve as role models to students of color as well as white students. These role models can support and enhance student of color sense of self representation, sense of belonging, and retention. These role models will also impact white students positively when they see representations of people of color in leadership and academic roles versus the images of stereotypes often portrayed in the media. If white students have not had proximity with people of color prior to their college experience, these negative images portrayed in the media may support stereotypical beliefs. However, positive interactions, relationships, and bonds with students, professors, and managers of color can have a lasting impression on white students that may be life-changing.

### **Methods for Selecting Participants**

We have made lists of WOC we know in Massachusetts and Connecticut who hold leadership positions in their field and have influence on policies, protocols, or program development in the fields of non-profit, politics, and higher education. We will divided the list and reached out to prospective participants by email and asked them to participate in our research and to refer us to other WOC who may be interested in participating in the research. We reached out to the Massachusetts WOC Network, a network made up of WOC who hold positions in domestic violence and sexual assault non-profit programs throughout the state. We contacted WOC who work within non-profits in the city of Lawrence, MA.

For the higher education sample, we reached out to the African American Women of Higher Education - New England to recruit participants. Dr. Linda Meccouri assisted in recruiting WOC within the field of higher education in the Western part of the state of

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

Massachusetts. We researched the names of WOC in Boston who hold city councilor positions such as Ayanna Pressley, Michele Wu, Andrea Campbell, Annissa Essaibi-George and identified their aids so we can reach out to them to describe our research and how their participation and success will inspire other WOC to be involved in local politics. We engaged aids first since they handle the city councilors' schedules and have close proximity to them. We planned to reach women who had run a political campaign but were not elected since their experience will also be beneficial to the research findings by describing lessons learned. We also reached to WOC from the city of Lawrence who have run a local political campaign.

### **Method for Gathering Data**

This research will be done using participant surveys and semi-structured interviews. The participant surveys offered the demographical information of each participant, while the interviews would have better understanding of the experiences of these women given their demographics. This study aimed to involve the participation of 30 women who identify as WOC, and who currently hold leadership roles within the nonprofit sector, local politics, and higher education. An invitation to participate in this study will be sent to the participants via e-mail. Once participants have expressed interest, they were instructed to complete a 17-question online survey that will contain both qualitative and quantitative questions.

### **Method Implementation**

We gathered participants' responses through online surveys of qualitative and quantitative questions using Qualtrics. We then tabulated the answers for the quantitative data and transcribed the answers from the three qualitative questions. After transcribing and reviewing the qualitative answers, we identified themes in the data. We will transcribe these in -

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

depth interviews and look for additional or existing themes with hopes to have more in depth information.

### **Coding Process**

In our coding process, we reviewed all of the quantitative and qualitative responses and look for themes. The coded qualitative data was also coded as quantitative data. For example, while coding we saw common answers to the questions “What or who has supported your learning in the workplace?”. We counted all the common answers and derived percentages. This method helped us identify the factors that supported the leadership of WOC. Fifty-one (51) WOC who currently hold leadership roles within higher education and the nonprofit sector participated in a seventeen question online-survey. This survey was designed to understand the social, professional, educational, and personal factors that have supported the leadership of WOC. Responses have been separated by common and/or repetitive themes that were found in the data.

### **Results**

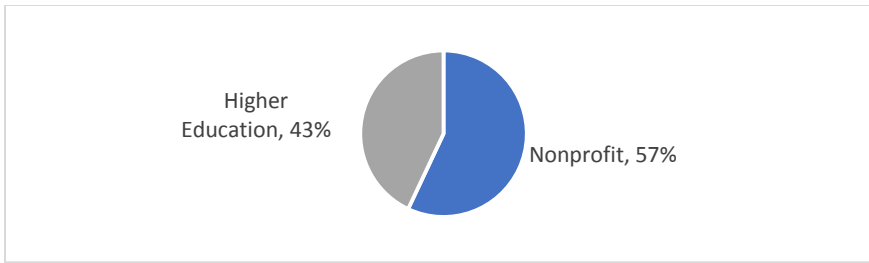
Due to the repetition of such themes, we were able to identify five key factors that attributed to the advancement and success of WOC. These five key factors are: access to formal education and training, mentorship and strong relationships, supportive workplace environments, individual attributes and self-directed learning, and spirituality,

### **Quantitative Questions**

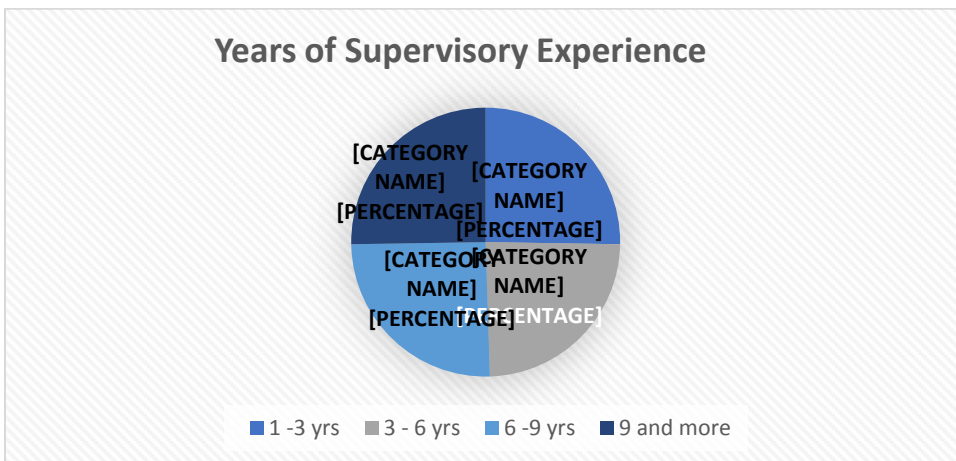
**Supervisory and management experience.** A total of fifty-one WOC leaders took part in this research. Twenty-nine of the respondents (57%) were WOC leaders in the field of non-profits and twenty-two (43%) were WOC leaders in the field of higher education.

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

### Participants' Representation of Higher Education and Nonprofit



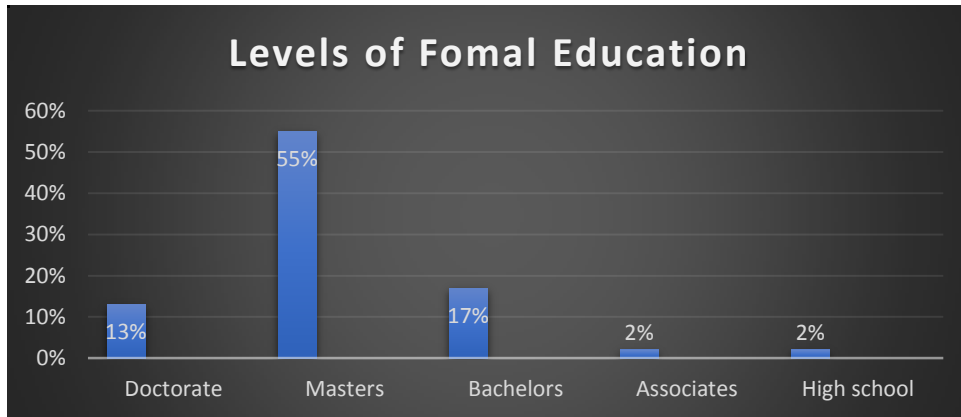
We wanted to explore how many years of supervisory experience WOC possessed. Thirteen responded (25%) have one to three years of experience. Twelve (24%) responded they have three to six years. Thirteen participants (25%) responded they have six to nine years of experience and thirteen respondents (25%) responded they have nine or more years of experience.



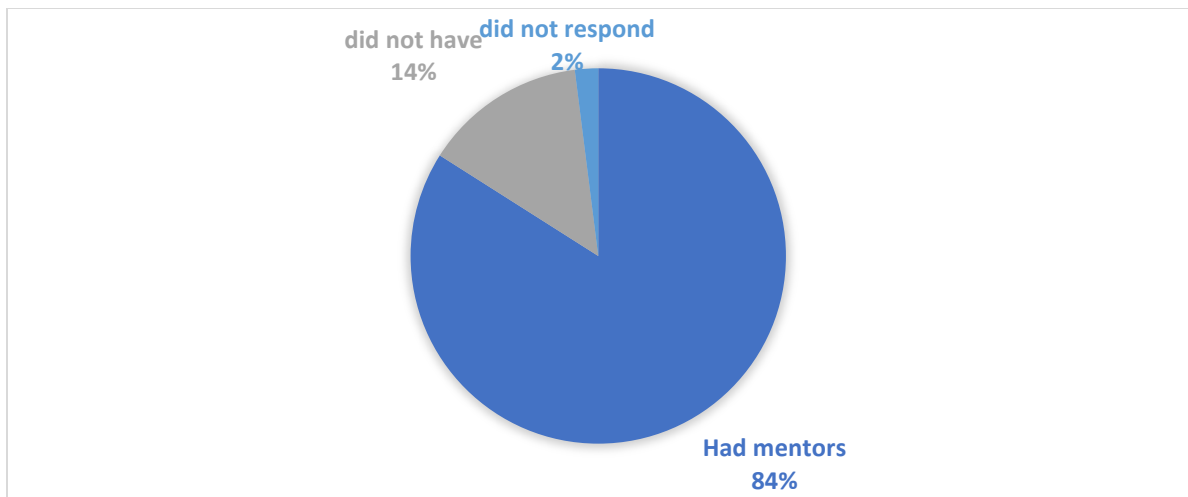
**Formal education.** Twelve (13%) respondents have doctorate degrees. Twenty-eight (55%) of the respondents have their Master's degrees. Nine respondents (17%) had their Bachelor's degrees. One participant (2%) had an associate degree. One participant (2%) held a high school degree.



## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

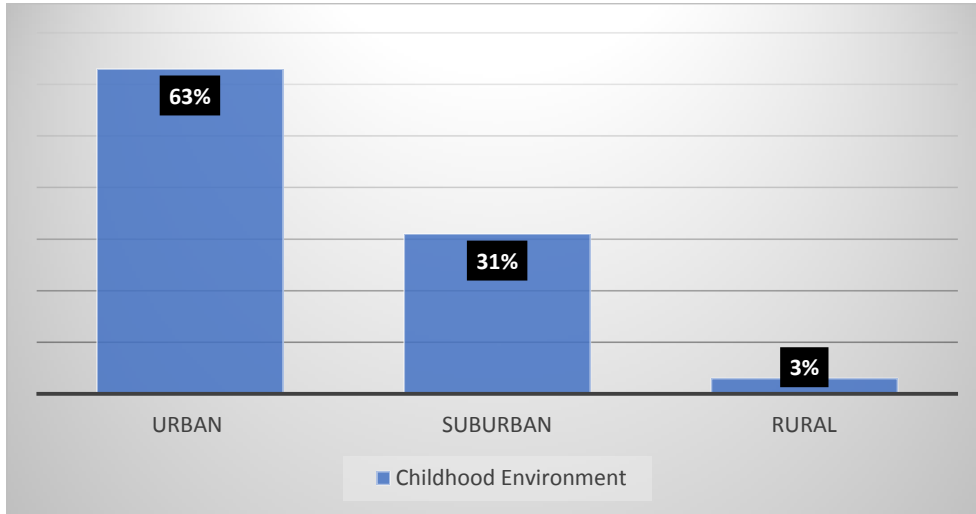


**Mentorship.** Forty-three of respondents (84%) reported they had a mentor who supported them throughout their trajectory to leadership. Seven respondents (14%) reported they did not have a mentor, and two did not answer.

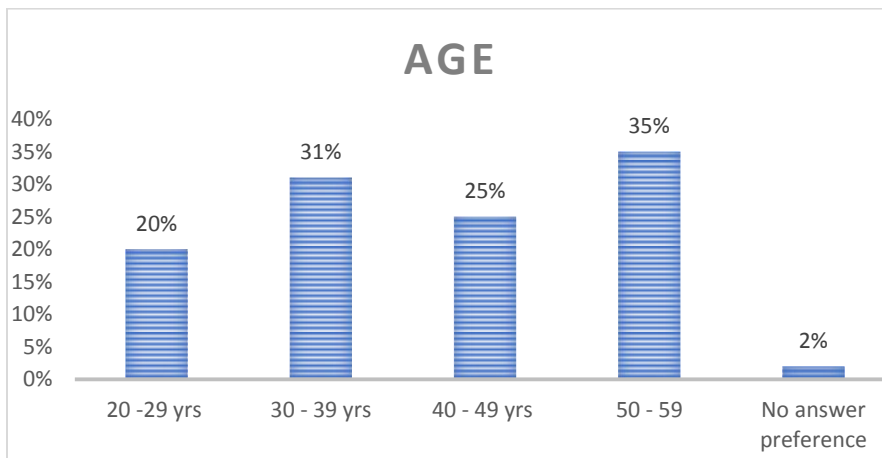


**Childhood living environment.** Thirty-two (63%) reported they grew up in an urban setting. Sixteen respondents (31%) reported they grew up in a suburban environment while six respondents (3%) reported they grew up in a rural environment.

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

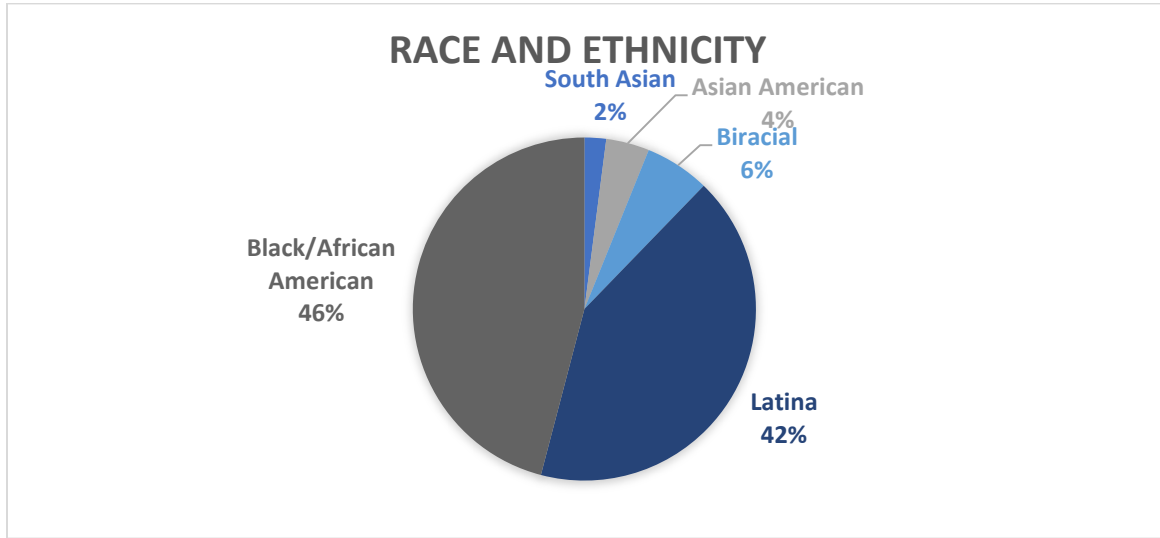


**Age and racial/ethnic identity.** Five respondents (20%) are between the ages of 20 to 29. Sixteen respondents (31%) are between the ages of 30 to 39 years of age. Thirteen respondents (25%) are between the ages of 40 to 49 years of age and sixteen respondents (35%) are between the ages of 50 to 59. One participant preferred not to answer.

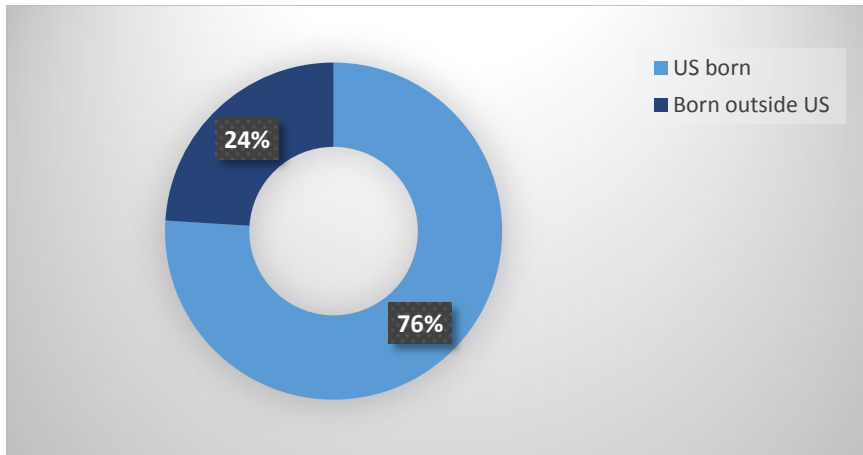


One participant (2%) reported she is South Asian. Two (4%) identified as Asian American. Three (6%) identified as biracial. Twenty-one (41%) identified as Latina, and twenty-three (45%) identified as Black/African American. One respondent preferred not to answer.

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

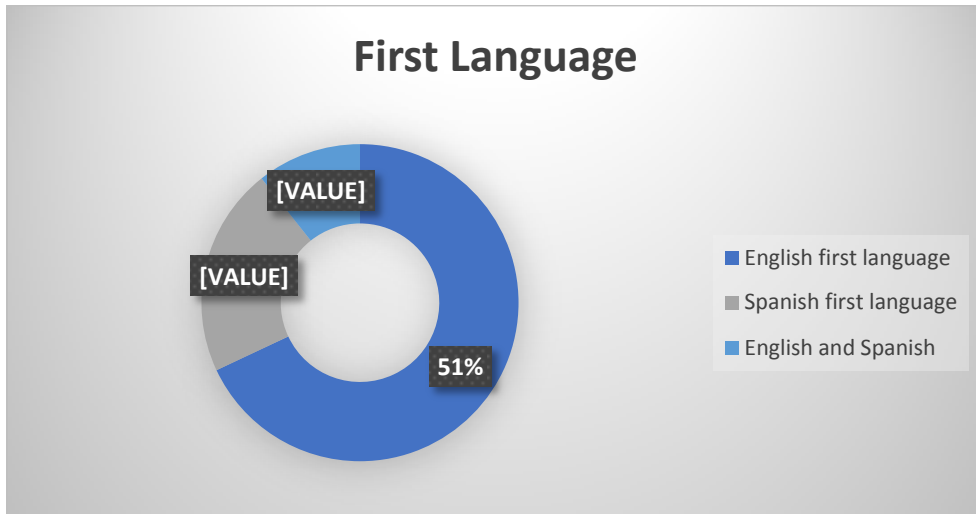


**Place of birth and language.** Thirty-nine respondents (76%) were born in the United States in comparison to twelve women (24%) who were born outside the United States.

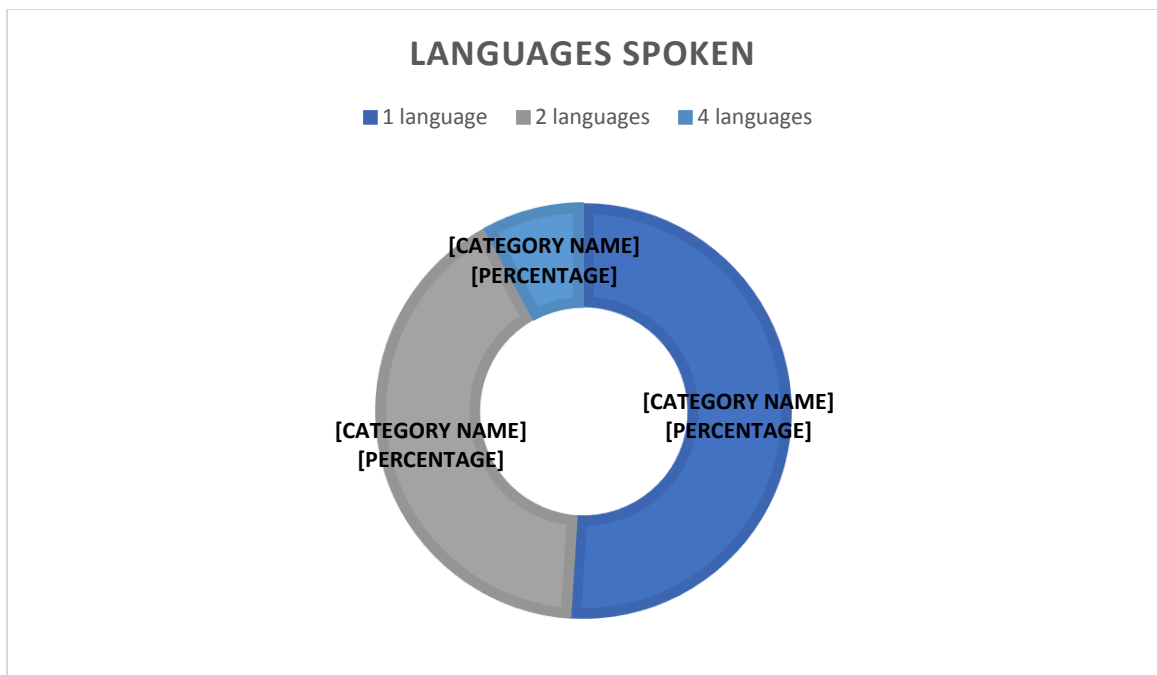


Thirty-eight of the respondents (75%) reported English was their primary language, eight (16%) reported Spanish was their primary language, and five (8%) reported both English and Spanish was their primary language.

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR



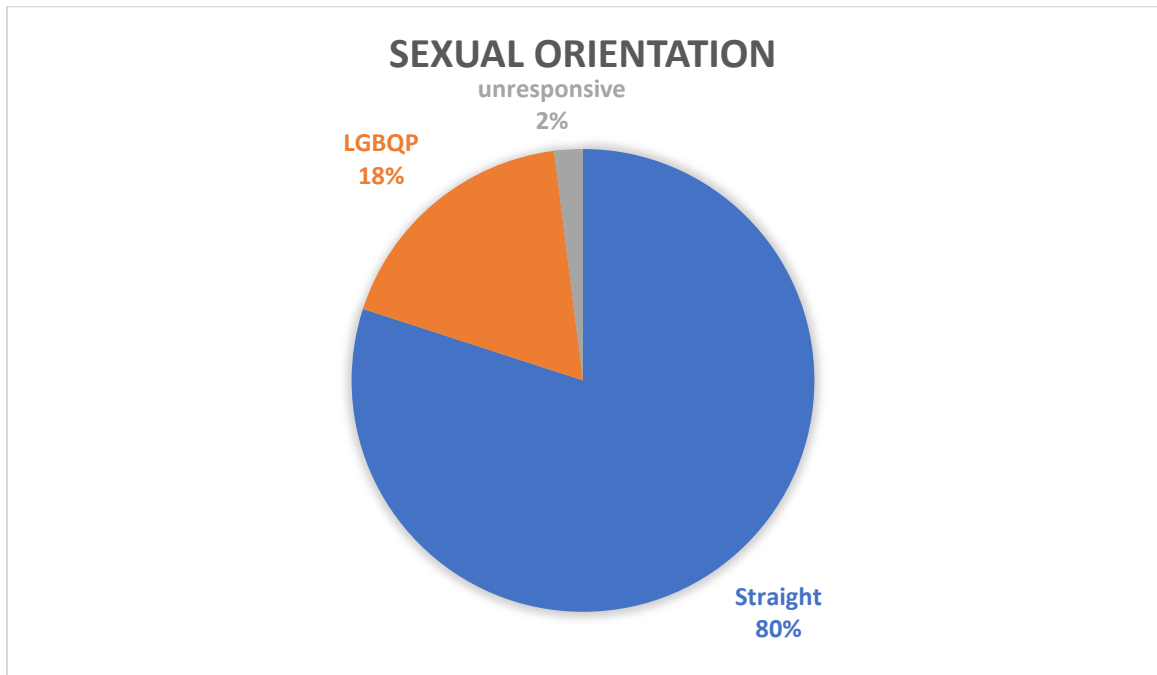
Twenty-six respondents (51%) reported they spoke one language and twenty-one (41%) reported they spoke two languages while four respondents 8% reported they spoke four languages.



**Sexual orientation and gender identity.** Forty-one respondents (80%) identify as straight, two (4%) identify as gay, two 4% identify as queer, one respondent (2%) identifies as

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

pansexual, one participant (2%) identifies as bisexual, and one participant (2%) identifies as a lesbian. One participant (2%) preferred not to answer her sexual orientation and one 2% answered female. We are not certain if this respondent intended to answer sexual orientation or gender identity. All the respondents identified as female. Four (8%) respondents specified their gender identity as cis-gender female.



### Qualitative Questions

#### Who or what has supported your ability to learn in your career?

**access and value of formal education.** Parents' and family members' value of formal education was identified as a supportive factor to learning. One respondent shared, "in my early childhood I lived with my maternal grandfather who impressed upon me the importance of education and I internalized that." Another responded shared,

My family and community have supported by ability to learn in my career.

Though I was raised in a single parent household, both of my parents were equally involved in my education and development as a person. My mother

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

served as the prime example of an independent, educated woman of color and likewise, she encouraged me to follow suit by excelling in education and challenging myself with off-island, educational opportunities. Likewise, my father, also a talented individual with a higher education degree, spent most of our valuable time together talking about life, its challenges, its lessons and the journey to maturity. My parents, coupled with my predominantly black and intimate island community, supported my ability to learn in my career.

Respondents identified having access to good education supported their learning later professionally. Practical supports such as financial aid was also identified. Within these institutions, individuals like teachers, professors, and chancellors supported their learning and advancements. A respondent who identified herself as a first-generation college student attributed her positive college experience to a transitional preparatory program. This opportunity helped her find employment post-graduation. Six respondents (12%) identified educational opportunities in the form of seminars, workshops, and trainings also supported their ability to learn.

**Mentors and influential relationships.** Forty-three (84%) of the respondents identified having a mentor or a strong relationship with an individual supported their ability to learn in the workplace. These supportive individuals included people like parents, family, their child, women supporters, other WOC, friends, partner, their community/village, co-workers, supervisors, directors, educators, teachers, professors, chancellors. Four respondents (8%) answered that their community supported their learning. One respondent expressed,

My parents, coupled with my predominantly black and intimate island community, supported my ability to learn in my career. As an island girl in this

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

environment, I was raised with my doctors, lawyers, teachers, governors, legislators, pastors and other roles of leadership being both women and WOC. As such, I have always approached my career and my studies with the understanding that learning and excellence were normal and I wasn't an exception.

These familial relationships provided emotional support, enthusiasm about education, as well as practical supports such as childcare. Three respondents specifically identified finding mentors outside their field supported their learning. One participant shared,

At one point in my career it became evident that I needed an advanced degree to achieve my intended goals. With that, I went back to school and graduated with an MSW. There had also been times when the support I needed was not available to me within my organization. I refused to let that stop me by expanding my knowledge and experience outside of my organization to gain expertise that ultimately positioned me for advancement both in and outside of my agency.

One participant answered her counselor's support aided her ability to learn in the workplace.

**Workplace environments and supervisors.** One participant answered the collaborative structure of the organization helped her learn because it gave her the opportunity to learn different aspects of the organization acquiring a broad scope of experience. Nine respondents (18%) answered supervisors and managers have supported their advancement.

**Individual beliefs.** WOC responded both actions and beliefs supported their ability to learn throughout their career. Four respondents (8%) responded self-determination was a factor that supported their ability to learn. One participant responded that living in a low-income household gave her determination and motivation to learn. Other answers included self-awareness. Commitment to learning and commitment to social justice supported a

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

respondent's ability to learn. Attributes such as resiliency, curiosity, drive, optimism, and optimism contributed to their advancement in learning.

**Actions.** Ten respondents (20%) identified actions supported their learning. These actions included, taking more responsibility (two respondents, 4%), producing high quality work, going outside the field to learn, and independently searching for information. One participant answered, “Mostly I have used every available piece of written material I have had access to throughout the years and have studied it and tried to piece it all together.” Another WOC explained, “I refused to let that stop me by expanding my knowledge and experience outside of my organization to gain expertise that ultimately positioned me for advancement both in and outside of my agency.”

**Spirituality.** Three respondents (6%) responded her faith in God supported her ability to learn in the workplace.

**Learning from mistakes.** Two respondents (4%) responded they learned by making mistakes.

**Networking.** Five respondents (10%) identified having connections to associations and networking supported their ability to learn.

### **Can you describe obstacles that have interfered with your professional advancement?**

One respondent (3%) stated the impact of childhood trauma interfered with her professional advancement. Thirteen respondents (42%) responded that racism has impacted their professional advancement. Ten respondents answered lack of support in the workplace interfered with their professional advancement. This lack of support in the workplace was identified as no support from supervisors (four respondents, 13%). One participant shared, “Lack of adequate



## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

supervision. I spent most of my initial months navigating and learning my role without any guidance.”

Three respondents (10%) responded lack of opportunity and ability to “move up” interfered with their professional advancement. One participant stated, “Lack of mobility- no other position to advance to. Management level without any place to advance to.” Another respondent shared,

I worked for a nonprofit organization for 5 years, providing counseling services. At the time I was the only minority that worked in the corporate office. Though I exceeded the requirements to be considered for management positions, I was never given the opportunity to interview. Because I believed in the mission of the organization I also volunteered for them, providing awareness information. A fellow volunteer (African American) explained to me that in her 10 years of volunteering there weren't any minority managers under the current director. I always believed that my work ethic would always out shine any 'ism', I was wrong.

Two respondents (6%) identified lack of information such as access to budgets and fundraising has impacted their professional advancement. One participant explains,

At a previous organization, I wasn't given access to certain information (budgeting, finance, grant-writing, working with boards, fundraising etc..) that leaders are required to have in order to become executives. This information is necessary for professional development and to ensure a certain comfort level to become an executive and/or preserve that position. The lack of exposure becomes a barrier to increasing the number of leaders of color in non-profit.

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

One respondent (2%) answered not having workplace political strategy interfered with professional advancement. One respondent (2%) answered holding a leadership position as an executive director feels like there is no room to grow professionally after reaching that position of leadership other than starting her own non-profit. She also fears leaving her position may mean for her to start over and will have to prove herself all over again.

Because I am the only woman of color in a leadership position in the city that I live and work, I have felt a sense of responsibility and commitment to the organization and the region. As a current executive director of a community center, it is difficult to branch out to the next level of professional advancement given that I already am part of many decision-making tables. This would mean starting again in a different place and risking losing the leadership that has already been established by myself and for communities of color as white leadership can take on my role if I leave.

Another participant shares there are perceived limited options for WOC within nonprofits once an executive director position is reached.

I have always worked in the nonprofit sector and unless I wanted to be the President or Executive Director, there wasn't much room to grow given the small size of most organizations. Similarly, though I am now the Executive Director of an agency, I have already advanced to the capacity offered through the organization and therefore, advancement, would mean creating my own non-profit or further developing my own business.

Four respondents (8%) responded their responsibility to their family needs has impacted their professional advancement. One participant responded safe and affordable childcare impacted

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

their professional advancement. Thirteen respondent answered racism and/or institutional racism interfered with their professional advancement. Five respondents (10%) answered sexism has interfered with their professional advancement. Two respondents (4%) identified lack of knowledge and networking has interfered with their advancement. One respondent answered their lack of confidence interfered with their advancement. Two respondents (4%) responded this was not an issue for them. Two respondents (4%) responded lack of financial resources has interfered with professional advancement and one participant (2%) identified adultism as a reason for interference with professional advancement. She felt others did not take her seriously because she's younger than other managers but considered old enough not to be able to make mistakes. One respondent (2%) answered she was too busy in her current role to focus on her professional advancement.

### **How can employers recruit a more diverse workplace?**

**Understanding and commitment to Diversity.** Seven respondents (14%) identified commitment to diversity was essential in recruiting a diverse workplace. Four respondents (8%) identified valuing diversity can support a diverse work environment.

**Actions and strategies.** Actions and strategies were identified such as provide diversity training for staff especially Human Resources Department of hiring committee, include people of color in the hiring committee, and provide training and mentorship opportunities for WOC. Two respondents (4%) responded providing compensation that benefits for women and Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer and Transgender (LGBQ/T) employees such as comprehensive maternity leaves and flexibility and comprehensive health care that is inclusive to LGBQ/T employees.

**Intentional and meaningful recruitment strategies.** Intentional and meaningful recruitment strategies were also identified as necessary in creating a diverse workplace.

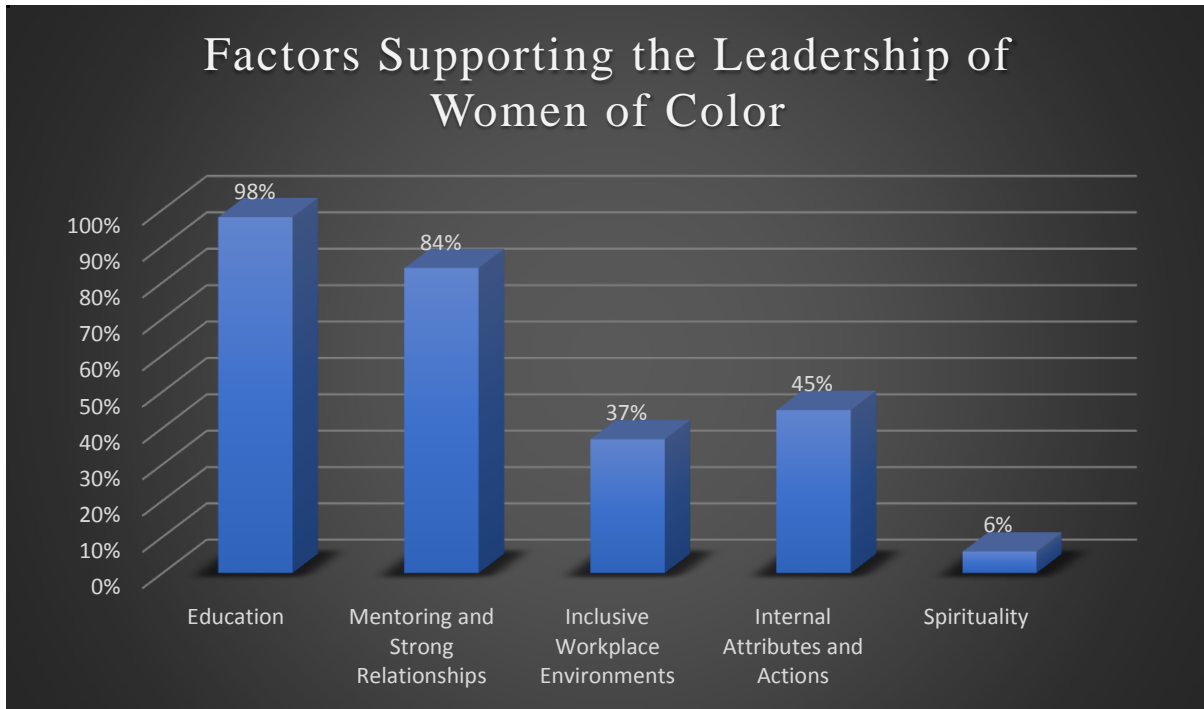
## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

Recruitment strategies included recruiting from local community colleges or local organizations that serve and employ people of color, reaching out to associations and graduate programs supporting people of color, recruiting from different sectors, recruiting from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), ensuring that the hiring committee is diverse. Two respondents (4%) expressed it is important employers ultimately see and value the skills and strengths of the individual and not hire an individual because of their diverse identity. A participant described the importance in holding racist employees accountable for their racism contributes to a diverse workplace environment. This supports the wellbeing of employees of color since not holding employees who are racist accountable perpetuates racist covert and overt hostile behavior toward employees of color hindering their wellbeing, professional development, and productivity.

### **Discussion**

Our findings suggest that WOC in leadership roles are supported by education, mentoring and strong relationships, inclusive workplace environments, personal attributes, self-directed learning, and spirituality. The meaning of these findings informs the researchers of the importance of social capital. The 51 WOC leaders had individuals, groups, associations, and communities who influenced and supported their education, learning, growth, and work/life responsibilities. A primary caretaker, usually a parent, valued formal education and work ethic. This value and example of work ethic influenced WOC leaders' drive to succeed. Communities of color are rich in education, culture, support, and comfort resulting in successful leaders despite the oppression they face daily.

### **Connecting our Findings to the Literature**



**Education.** Ninety-eight percent of the WOC participants have at least a Bachelor's Degree or higher. Women working within higher education institutions had higher levels of education in comparison to women working in nonprofits. Within the higher education sample, 45% have doctorate degrees in comparison to 7% of women in nonprofits. One leader within a nonprofit had a high-school degree and one woman had an associate degree. Both women advanced within the non-profit. WOC leaders in both fields were influenced by their parents', families', and community's value of education. This influence encouraged them to pursue learning and formal education.

**Mentoring and strong relationships.** Mentoring is very important element when it comes to WOC accessing social mobility within their professional careers. Lou (2015) writes "Mentoring relationships formed between womyn of Color and other leaders with non-dominant identities and dominant identities can be positive in increasing retention and promotion" (p. 92). We found that mentoring and strong relationships played a significant role in the leadership of

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

WOC. Supportive individuals ranged from family, friends, professors, co-workers, and supervisors. The lack of support was also a challenge for some WOCL. Cox (2008) helped us to understand the importance of supporting WOCL when highlighting “Social support, regardless of where it comes from, is not only welcomed by women of color but also identified as one of the most critical contributors to either their success or failure.” (p 32)

**Inclusive workplace environments.** In the literature, we have learned that WOC often are not represented in leadership roles in the workplace. The literature has informed us that nonprofit organizations often offer services to communities in need; however, many organizations in the nonprofit sector are managed by white non-Hispanic individuals who oversee a diverse staff (Adesaogun et al., 2015). Nonprofit agencies that lack representation from people of color in leadership roles may experience difficulty in responding to the needs of their targeted populations, since many of the populations are comprised of racially diverse individuals (Adesaogun et al., 2015). Both nonprofit organizations and higher education institutions must be intentional in their recruitment efforts when hiring new staff. One participant mentioned, “Employers have to move beyond the standard recruitment tools in order to attract a diverse workplace. In my opinion, recruiters have to approach attracting diverse employees in a real meaningful way.”

In addition, the literature has suggested that WOC often are not supported by workplace supervisors, and this claim is evident within our findings. Another woman shared, “Different supervisors have stopped me from growing professionally and have not been supportive. I've worked in offices with supervisors that describe themselves as WOC and they have not supported me or the program I was working on.” In addition, a woman working in higher education voiced,

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

I think there have been multiple situations where instead of supporting my professional advancement supervisors have challenged my ideas. An example would be, in a previous position, I wanted to organize a group to host conversations throughout the academic year that would celebrate diversity - all year - not just during Black History Month or Women's History month. When I shared this idea, my supervisor didn't offer me resources or support but when it became 'the talk' on campus, she wanted to know how she could get involved.

Some of our participants have talked about the racism experienced and the lack of awareness of how to respond to discrimination through institutional protocols. One woman reported,

The lack of support in pursuing affirmative action complaints in Higher Education, particularly at one public state institution in MA. From personal experience, I struggled in reporting oppressive behaviors that violates the core institution mission of diversity and inclusion. I did not receive proper orientation as an employee in reporting to HR as first response, information an individual usually receives during a new employee training or first day of work. It is the responsibility of supervisors to ensure that their employees are welcomed, treated with respect and to NOT experience racial and ethnic discrimination. Unfortunately, I experienced racial and ethnic discrimination based on my cultural markers and the 'grievance' was considered invalid by the President of the Institution who referred to my personal narrative (which was used as evidence by the Affirmative Action officer who processed the claim) as 'ambiguous evidence.' This experience interfered with my professional advancement because I no longer wished to be associated with the institution and an employer of a

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

Federal funded program. Due to what I experienced with my supervisor, I actively searched for new employment and accepted the first job I was offered. Post Affirmative action complaint, there was no efforts from the institution to reconcile or show that I was a valued employee, even though former/current students, administrators and employee expressed how valued I was. As a Woman of Color, my narrative of racial discrimination was not taken serious because it was towards a White employee with tenure, which gave me insight that the field of Higher Education still operates under a White supremacy mind frame. Although I am very passionate about education and dedicated 8 years in the Higher Education field, not having proper guidance on where to go hurt me as an employee.

Many women described their experiences of not being supported in the workplace and other women eight (16%) stated their supervisors and managers contributed to their ability to learn in their career. Supportive and mentoring supervisors, managers, and directors contribute to the advancement of WOC.

**Attributes and actions.** Twenty-three respondents (45%) shared personal attributes and self-directed actions contributed to their learning and professional mobility. 3 respondents (6%) described self-determination as an attribute. Others described personal attributes such as: self, drive, resilience, perseverance, commitment, curiosity, and optimism, Actions such as: self-directed learning, taking on more than required, going outside the field, and producing high quality work were described as actions that contributed to their learning and success. These attributes and actions were similar to the results found in Monique Grissette-Banks (2014) research on the emotional intelligence of African American women leaders. The women in her



## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

research perseverance, outspiraling or going to another field to advance, having determination and resiliency. (Grissette-Banks, 2014)

**Spirituality.** Spirituality and faith in God emerged as key themes. This is consistent with the literature. WOC reported prayer and spirituality was used as a coping mechanism to deal with work stressors and as a way to mentally prepare themselves to deal with racism at work. They believed prayer helped them and bring about positive outcomes. Membership to a church also provided them with a culturally specific way to receive support through community with similar beliefs and values. These supports also provided concrete supports such as guidance, childcare, recreational activities, transportation, and financial supports (Hall, Everett, & Hamilton-Mason, 2012)

### **Unexpected Findings**

Our findings have also helped us discover unexpected information about WOC in higher education and the nonprofit sector. From our results, we have learned there are more Latina women leaders represented in the nonprofit sector (62%) compared to the other identified races/ethnicities. In contrast, there are more Black/African American women who work at higher education institutions (59%) compared to the other identified races/ethnicities. We also found that there are more LGBTQ WOC working in nonprofit organizations (27%) than there are in higher education (8%). We have uncovered that there are more WOC in their 30s than any other age group that work within nonprofit organizations, and there are more women in their 40s working at higher education institutions than any other age group. Out of the 51 WOC that we surveyed (63% grew up in urban communities and 76% were born in the United States. Interestingly, there are more WOC who speak more than one language in the nonprofit sector 48% compared to 32% in higher education.

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

Two women leaders in higher education reported that speaking Spanish interfered with their professional advancement within their organizations. They were discouraged from applying for a management position because they were needed in their direct service role to serve the Spanish speaking community. Speaking another language was not valued as skill necessary for professional advancement within these two organizations. Most WOC had social capacity in the form of friends, family, co-workers, supervisors, and their community. We did not expect the extent of how valuable social supports and communities of color are to WOC leaders. One respondent mentioned how important her family and community are to her,

My family and community have supported by ability to learn in my career. Though I was raised in a single parent household, both of my parents were equally involved in my education and development as a person. My mother served as the prime example of an independent, educated woman of color and likewise, she encouraged me to follow suit by excelling in education and challenging myself with off-island, educational opportunities. Likewise, my father, also a talented individual with a higher education degree, spent most of our valuable time together talking about life, its challenges, its lessons and the journey to maturity. My parents, coupled with my predominantly black and intimate island community, supported my ability to learn in my career. As an island girl in this environment, I was raised with my doctors, lawyers, teachers, governors, legislators, pastors and other roles of leadership being both women and WOC. As such, I have always approached my career and my studies with the understanding that learning and excellence were normal and I wasn't an exception.

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

We also learned that WOCL were motivated by difficult conditions. Their self-determination and perseverance along with family's value of formal education influenced their pursuit of learning and achievement of leadership roles.

### **Limitations**

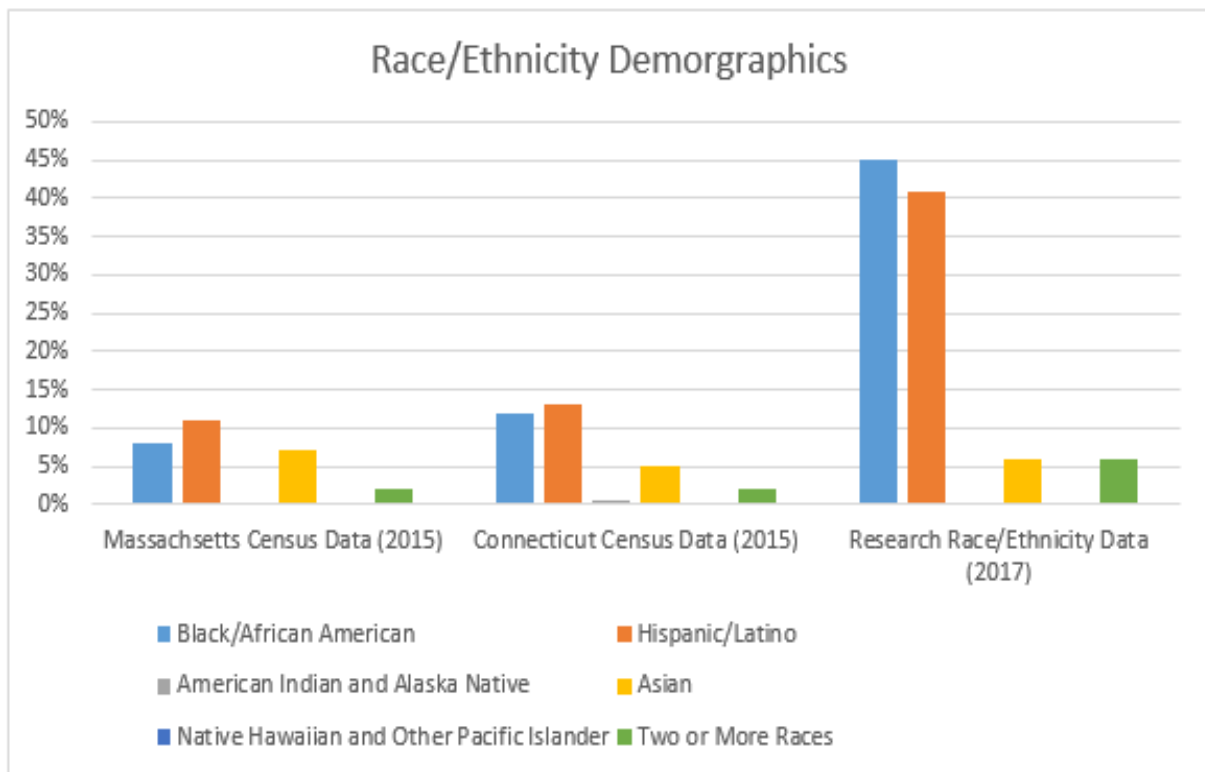
While conducting our research, we found certain limitations that prevented us from reaching our desired outcome. Our first limitation was that we did not receive our desired number of WOCL within local politics. With this study, we anticipated to survey at least 60 WOC: 20 from higher education, 20 from the nonprofit sector, and 20 from local politics. Unfortunately, we only received a total of two WOC participants from local politics. Our hope was to compare the experiences of women within these three fields; however, in order to have effective comparable data, we needed to have at least 16 participants from each field.

Another limitation to our study was our timeline. We hoped for more time to design our research, conduct the fieldwork, and analyze our research and its findings. Due to our timeline short, we unfortunately did not have time to conduct any face-to-face interviews with participants. All of the qualitative data was provided by the online survey. We also found the recruitment of WOC in higher education to be challenging. After distributing our survey, we had more participants from nonprofits than higher education complete the survey. In order to increase the number of higher education participants, we extended our deadline for WOC to complete the online survey, and we also recruited women from the New England African American Women in Higher Education (AAWHE). This recruitment resulted in 27% of the higher education participants. Time limitations also did not allow us to conduct in person qualitative interviews with six WOC respondents. Although we were interested in learning more about their responses

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

we did not have time to schedule an interview, code their qualitative interview, and include in our findings.

Lastly, we were intrigued that out of the 51 WOC to complete our survey, 41% are Latina and 45% are Black/African American. This finding caused us to question if it is assumed that the term “WOC” is specific to Black/African American and Latina/Hispanic women? We as researchers, identify as WOC, specifically Black and Latina and reached out our networks to recruit participants and did not target specific ethnic groups to participate in the research. With more time, we would have reached out to ethnic specific organizations that serve Asian communities in order to increase our representation of Asian WOCL or South Asian WOCL.



### Recommendations for Future Research

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

For individuals or institutions who are interested in further research of this topic, we suggest future qualitative research to explore the layers of oppression faced by WOC with multiple identities including: religion, sexual orientation, gender expression, gender-identity, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, disabilities, and US citizenship. Studies included in the literature review described leadership research has been conducted on women and leadership, and people of color and leadership; however, there is less research conducted in examining racism and sexism; hence, WOC's experiences of attaining leadership roles. Hall et al. (2012) described this experience as gendered racism. We also suggest for researchers interested in the experiences of WOCL within local politics to focus solely on this field since we encountered difficulty identifying and recruiting women to participate in the research. The WOCL in local politics we identified represented communities that were highly populated by people of color such as: Boston, MA, Chelsea, MA, and Lawrence, MA. We did not find WOC politicians representing communities largely populated by Caucasians.

We recognize there is a lack of representation of WOCL in higher education, local politics, and the nonprofit sector; however, there are many WOC who have been successful in their career advancement. Further research should look to understand how the workplace and supervisors can support the professional mobility of WOC and their quest to professional advancement. Research of this stature should be investigated using a strengths-based approach to ensure that future studies are not explored through a deficit model. We recommend future research to include a higher representation of Asian, Asian American, and South Asian women. We recommend reaching out to ethnic specific organizations and targeting recruitment to have equal representation of ethnic groups. Women who work within ethnic specific organizations such as the Asian Task Force Against Domestic Violence or Saheli who serves South Asian

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

women may have different experiences working within ethnic specific organizations in comparison to working in dominantly Caucasian represented institutions.

### **Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

Respondents had a great deal of insight on how organizations could become diverse. The responses described a necessary process is needed to achieve inclusive environments instead of a one-step solution.

- a. First, it is essential for institutions to recognize the importance of a diverse workplace and a clear understanding of what diversity means and looks like.
- b. 14% of respondents expressed having a commitment to diversity is essential in creating a diverse workplace environment. This commitment needs to be present within mission statements, value and vision statements, policies, and protocols.
- c. This commitment also needs to be communicated to the public via websites, social media, and print materials. Meaningful relationships with communities of color and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) are important to increase access and communication with the institution.
- d. Education and trainings on diversity, inclusion, and anti-racism are important for the institution to offer all employees, managers, and human resources when diversifying the workplace. Hiring committees must include WOC.
- e. Recruitment of employees must change in order to recruit diverse employees. The same practices of recruitment and hiring will not hire different types of people. Meaningful relationships with communities of color, associations supporting people of color, and with HBCU will maximize the opportunities to recruit people

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

of color. Language should be implicit and state the institution is recruiting diverse employees and the ways the institution will support people of color.

- f. Provide flexibility for women and parents as well as benefits that will support LGBTQ/T people such as medical insurance. Also compensate employees who speak a second language. This recommendation was also included in Teague's (2015) research, which cites (Deloitte, 2011),
  - i. Among other institutional policies and practices that should be examined, ensuring workplace flexibility not only will result in the retention of talented women desiring to work part-time, but also affords organizations significant additional benefits, including reduced work/life conflict for men and women, enhanced productivity for managers (male or female, with children or without), and improved well-being and reduced absenteeism for all employees" (Teague, 2016, p.14).
- g. Hold people accountable when they are oppressive and racists. This will make people of color feel safer. One respondent described, "People of color attract more people of color. Ask current employees of color what they feel is supportive to them in the workplace."
- h. "Do not hire to check a box", a respondent shared. It is important people are hired based on their skills, attributes, and experiences and not only hired to for the organization to increase the number of people of color employees.
- i. Boards of directors must also be diverse and include WOC.
- j. Mentoring and training opportunities should be part of ongoing supervision of WOC.

## FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEADERSHIP OF WOMEN OF COLOR

A significant number of WOCL, 84%, identified a mentor who had supported their learning and career advancement. We recommend WOC identify individuals who have supported them and who they have learned from since these individuals will impact their advancement both personal and professional. Networking opportunities were identified by participants as helpful to their advancement. We recommend WOC connecting with associations and networks that support women and specifically WOC. Self-directed learning was identified as helpful to the respondents. Some respondents shared they did this independently because they were not offered much orientation and information. We recommend for WOC to ask and seek for information. Some respondents answered going outside their organization or field was helpful to them when the organization was not providing education and advancement.

WOC also identified taking on more responsibility and producing high quality results helped their professional advancement. We recommend for WOC to produce high quality work and seek opportunities to learn professionally by taking on different projects or responsibilities. However, we caution for WOC to solely take on more responsibilities without learning or advancing since respondents identified being busy with work tasks kept them from advancing professionally. It is essential for WOC to evaluate the work they are currently doing and assess if the work is providing learning and growing opportunities. This phenomenon of being too busy to advance was also referenced in the literature on women's leadership in higher education Cox (2008). WOC faculty's involvement in committees and support of students often kept them from their research and attaining tenure.

Education and information was identified as a key factor in the advancement of WOC. We recommend for WOC to seek mentors, workshops, networking opportunities to learn and advance.



### **Conclusion**

We recognize that there are many factors that negate WOC from obtaining professional leadership roles. WOCL shared that they face systemic and institutional oppression despite their leadership role. However, WOCL also shared their wisdom and identified concrete ways to create inclusive work environments and support WOC's leadership specifically within higher education and the nonprofit sector. If such recommendations are implemented, more WOC's leadership will create inclusive work environments, resources, and opportunities for people of color within nonprofits and higher education institutions. The research has highlighted the importance the key role mentorship and social capital play in the leadership development and sustainment of WOC.

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